

AMAZON TRAIL

I do believe in fairies

The downside of growing up is confronting mortality: Peter Pan never worried about cancer

by Lee Lynch

Middle age is a very interesting time of life. Here I am just getting used to being all grown up, gleefully storing nuggets of wisdom, and suddenly I find myself staring up at strange-looking machines which might have been designed for the *Star Trek* sick bay.

Lumps, disintegrating bone mass, tendinitis, worn joints, the hormone wars which beset mid-life women, memory loss (not always a bad thing), sick and dying peers, failing elders—what a joy. I'll bet Peter Pan never lurked about the local medical center.

But here I am, waiting for the surgeon to poke and prod and decide which method to use to determine if I am one of this year's breast cancer statistics. Peter Pan never worried about cancer.

When I first found The Lump it was like, oh, that's what I get for being good and doing self-examinations. Of course it'll be nothing, just some glandular glitch, a hormonal blip, even a dumb little cyst. The gynecologist will act as if I'm wasting her time. Still, I'm a well-trained middle-class person who works hard for my health insurance. I'll check it out.

I don't know whether I was more impressed or scared that I was able to get an appointment with the gynecologist so quickly. Then, as she examined me, the words I may never forget: Yes, I feel it.

By the next day I was in X-ray with a technician who would be the first of a ridiculous number of middle-aged women with war stories about Lumps of their own.

(What an absurd and undignified word for such potent instruments of mortality: lumps.) The women I spoke to had had Lumps aspirated and biopsied and sliced and removed. They had scars and empty bras and seemed generally to consider the whole business a big bore, but they also had oceans of empathy for the new kid on the block. More important for me even than their empathy is that they are living, walking, talking proof that cancer does not equal death. At least, not always.

Nevertheless, sitting here in the surgeon's examining room today, waiting for The Man (there is no such animal as a woman surgeon at my rural HMO), my mind roams into all sorts of shadowy recesses. Is my will tight enough? Will I ever smell another honeysuckle bush? Poor Lover's already suffered through the loss of a partner, I can't let it happen again. What did I do to give myself cancer? Was it my father's secondhand smoke? Is it the stress level of juggling a straight career with writing? Should I stop eating salt, my last remaining dietary sin?

Time seems to compress even more when mortality knocks at a hitherto sealed door. Will I have time to finish the rewrite on my novel? What about the stories clamoring to get written? At least I can stop worrying about my car's 19th birthday—and start worrying that it may outlast me!

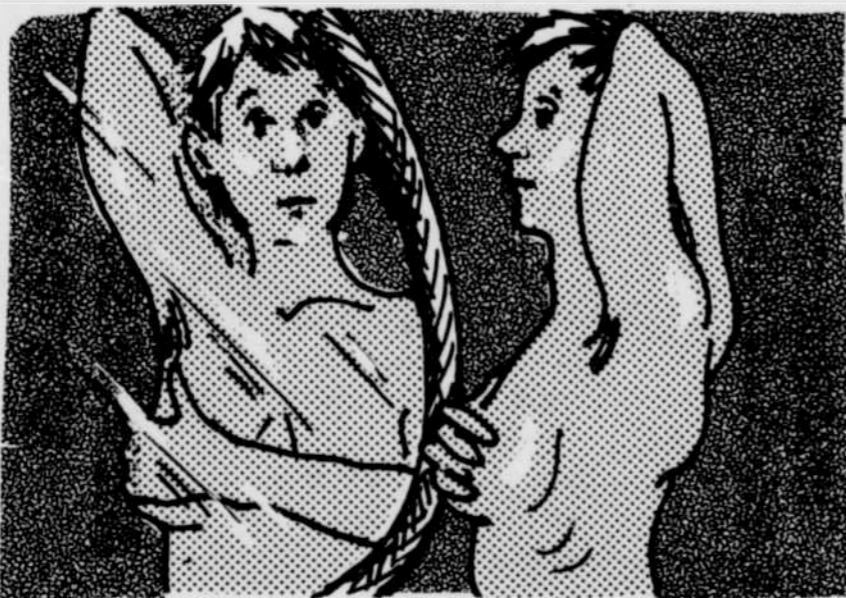
Just as this relentless attack of inner terrorism gets out of hand, the surgeon arrives. Surprisingly, I like him. Maybe 55, bushy white moustache, he's not terribly invasive for a presumably straight male and a surgeon. He explains a lot. He listens. He touches. He confirms. He recommends, reassures, guesses that we're only dealing with a cyst.

He calls the nurse. He asks, when I make notes, if I am writing a book. I tell him I'm writing this column because, well, because I'm not the only one going through this.

The nurse is warm and sweet and careful. She holds my hand as he inserts the needle. We laugh and joke through the procedure. She says it will feel like a bee sting, but bee stings hurt me a lot and this is nothing—until he tries to aspirate what turns out to be unspiratable. Then I feel the pain, but it's quick. While it's not a cyst after all, he's almost certain, he says, that it's not cancer, "But we can't leave it in there."

I wanted this ordeal to end today. The first available appointment for the biopsy is almost a week away. "You don't have cancer," he tells me, and the words will be my mantra, I'm sure, for a week. I do believe in fairies.

I don't cry until I get to Lover's office. She holds me. Keeps me close. Strokes my knee over and over as if to reassure both of us that I am here.



But this is me. I come with a lifetime warranty: good health, an almost entirely long-lived family. I am surprised, perplexed, indignant at this stupid Lump. Surely the surgeon is right and the biopsy will only serve to confirm that. Aren't I, after all, a privileged college-educated American?

The worst of it is how terribly ordinary it all is. Calmly discussing cutting the healthy little body that has served me so well. Knowing I won't go to Portland's Lesbian and Gay Pride Day Saturday with surgery hanging over my head. Knowing also that I will get this column to my various editors and do the grocery shopping on Saturday. Life, as the old saw says, goes on.

I think I'm not scared, but I keep getting teary-eyed. I think I'm calm, but I got lost driving over to Lover's office. I think I'm sane, but in the natural food store I find myself reading then buying a nutritional self-help book I've been resisting for years. "You don't have cancer," he said, but he also thought it would be a cyst. Overreacting or not, I won't be satisfied until the stitches are in and the lab report is negative.

If this is what being grown up is about, give me back the carefree days when all I had to worry me was falling in love too often, or getting busted at peace marches. Give me back menstrual cramps that only felt fatal and the feeling of invincibility that comes with youth. Let me be Peter Pan.

By next week at this time all I'll have to show for the worrying and the tears is a new scar on my body—one more nugget of wisdom. I'll be bored with my own war story, encouraging to the next lesbian with a Lump. This has been too close for comfort. I do believe in fairies.

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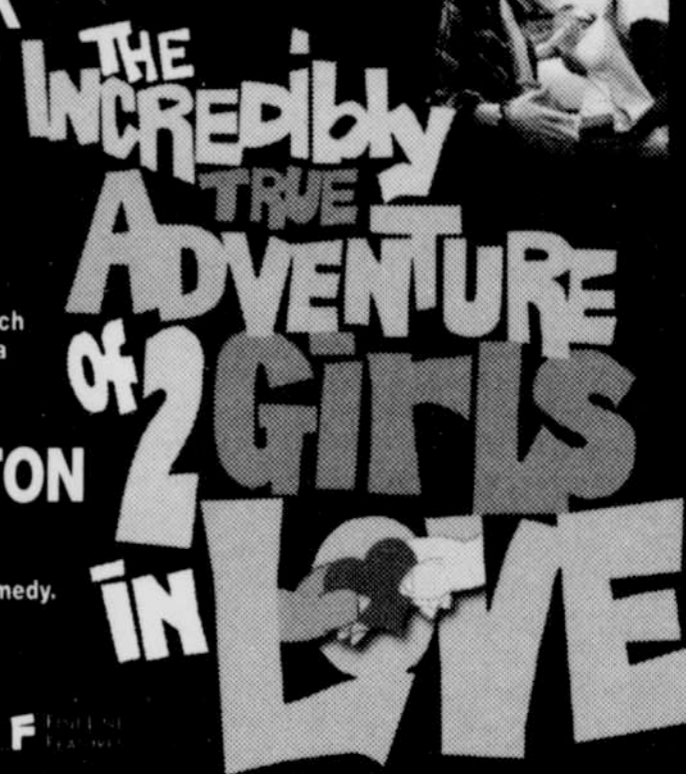
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